

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

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March 22, 2004

South Valley Area Planning Commission
City of Los Angeles
200 North Spring Street, Room 532
Los Angeles, California 90012

Shoup Avenue-Bell Creek Proposed Development
APCSV-2003-6542-ZC - Tentative Tract No. 60222
ENV-2003-6907-MND

Dear President Mahdesian and Commissioners:

Tentative Tract No. 60222 is proposed on the premier open space parcel along the 10-mile-long section of Bell Creek between the Simi Hills and the Sepulveda Basin. A primary goal of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is to protect habitat throughout the upper Los Angeles River watershed, including small parcels on the floor of the San Fernando Valley.

The ecological value of the subject 3.5-acre parcel is alone verified by the documented annual visits of migratory Canadian geese. The neighborhood open space value of the subject property is self-evident by the outpouring of dissent about the proposed project and its razor slim passage by the West Hills Neighborhood Council. Both the residents and the ecology of the west San Fernando Valley call for a better residential project, notably a project that sets aside permanent public open space along Bell Creek.

Open space is a resource with immeasurable public value whether it is located in the mountains surrounding Los Angeles or in the developed core of the San Fernando Valley. The numerous flood control channels that course across the San Fernando Valley provide open space between neighborhoods and refuge for numerous bird species. Just a few privately or publically-owned open space parcels remain next to these flood control channels. Only through the select protection of those few remaining parcels, will adequate habitat be left on the valley floor to maintain bird species above and beyond ravens and house finches. Also such open space lots represent the last opportunity to create pockets of nature for local residents.

Earlier this year the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy adopted the Simi Hills-Central Bell Creek Project Plan. This planning document addressed all the undeveloped land along

Bell Creek between Valley Circle Boulevard and Shoup Avenue. This plan documents both the human open space value of Tentative Tract No. 60222 and its ecological importance. The plan recommends public acquisition of the subject 3.5-acre site. State bond funds from numerous sources may be available to acquire the property.

Tentative Tract No. 60222 would fill the subject 3.5-acre natural area with over twenty detached homes. No ecological value would remain. To maintain bird species such as red tailed hawks, owls, and Canadian geese along the subject section of Bell Creek, and in the subject neighborhood, any project approval must include a mitigation measure that permanently protects some portion of the subject property along Bell Creek.

The Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) that covered both Tentative Tract No. 60222 and an adjacent hospital facility that is slated to become a school contains no disclosure about the ecological and open space value of the subject property. The MND is deficient for this omission and for not providing any mitigation measure for impacts to local natural and scenic resources. In addition, Tentative Tract No. 60222 requires a zone change (up zoning) from A1-1 to R1 to permit increased housing density. This up zoning of a key open space parcel also warrants mitigation in the form of an open space dedication.

The Conservancy urges your Commission to require the dedication of a minimum 15,000-square-foot public open space parcel in the western end of the project. Such a parcel must have some frontage with Bell Creek and public access from Sale Avenue. The Conservancy's joint powers agency, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) would agree to take title to the property and to manage it at no cost to the City, in perpetuity.

The property could remain closed to public and private access except on posted days and times if that is the will of the City and community. The parcel would thus be gated during closed hours. The MRCA has sworn rangers (peace officers) that would patrol the property and respond to problems. The MRCA would manage the site to maximize ecological and scenic values. Based on numerous contacts with the immediately surrounding neighbors, this idea of a small natural park has been widely embraced.

This project represents a critical juncture, and hopefully turning point, in the City's cooperative effort to maintain open space and parkland along the tributaries of the Los Angeles River. This letter provides ample evidence regarding the public value of the property. The applicant's requested zone change and obvious environmental impacts provide significant nexus to require such a small open space dedication.

South Valley Area Planning Commission

APCSV-2003-6542-ZC - Tentative Tract No. 60222 -ENV-2003-6907-MND

March 22, 2004

Page 3

We urge your Commission to deny any version of Tentative Tract No. 60222 that does not include at least a 15,000-square-foot public open space dedication along Bell Creek with access from Sale Avenue.

Please direct any questions to Paul Edelman, Deputy Director of Natural Resources and Planning, at the above Ramirez Canyon Park address and by phone at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,

JEROME C. DANIEL
Chairperson